



Evidence Summary

User Studies Differ Across Some Disciplines and May Not Be Very Effective

A review of:

Dervin, Brenda and CarrieLynn D. Reinhard. "Researchers and Practitioners Talk About Users and Each Other. Making User and Audience Studies Matter--Paper 1." *InformationResearch* 12.1 (Oct. 2006). 6 Aug. 2007 <<http://informationr.net/ir/12-1/paper286.html>>.

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Abstract

Objective – As part of a multi-staged project, this study seeks to identify the unanswered questions about users as found in three fields: library and information science (LIS), human computer interaction, and communication and media studies, as well as the convergences and divergences across these fields.

Design – A multi-phased, qualitative study involving individual face-to-face and telephone interviews, as well as self interviewing and focus groups.

Setting – The fields of LIS, human computer interaction, and communication and media studies as examined in interview situations.

Subjects – 83 international experts across the three fields, as well as 31 local experts from central Ohio, USA.

Methods – The majority of the 83 international experts in the fields of LIS, human computer interaction, and communication and media studies were interviewed by telephone (some in person). Thirty-one local experts (7 public and 24 academic library directors) were individually interviewed and also took part in focus groups. The Sense-Making Methodology was used as an interview approach with its emphasis on bridging gaps. Neutral interview questions were used to tease out the gaps in certain situations—in the case of this project, the gaps involve communication and the unanswered questions about users. Brenda Dervin

developed this approach, which has been transformed and adapted by Dervin and a host of other LIS researchers over the past 25 years. It is a metatheoretical approach that has “evolved into a generalized communication-based methodology seen as useful for the study of human sense-making (and sense-unmaking) in any context” (Dervin 729). The Sense-Making metatheory is implemented three ways in the method: “in the framing of research questions; in the designing of interviewing; and in the analyzing and concluding processes of research” (Dervin 737). In the research under review for this summary the answers to the gap-identifying questions allow different disciplines to begin to communicate and understand each other. Using Sense-Making in focus groups involves self interviewing (diaries, journals) and group discussions.

Interviews were transcribed using the “smooth verbatim approach” in which non fluencies such as repetition, hesitations, and partial words are eliminated. Care was taken to ensure anonymity, as this is necessary in the first step of the Sense-Making approach. The transcripts were analyzed for themes to capture a broad picture of what the participants struggle with across disciplinary and research-practice divides. Analysis was carried out by using comparative coding developed in early grounded theory combined with the Sense-Making methodology’s emphasis on gaps and bridging gaps. The “quotable quote” was the unit of analysis, and thematically representative quotes were selected from the transcriptions.

Main Results – In an attempt to analyze communication across and within disciplines, the researchers did a thematic analysis on the interviews conducted with their international and local experts. The thematic analysis found 12 major themes, which included a total of 75 sub themes. The

12 major themes include the following: Participants wanted to make a difference with their work; participants agreed that current user research is not doing the job; there are fundamental disagreements about users and user studies; there are fundamental disagreements about the purposes of using user studies; there are external forces that make carrying out and applying user studies difficult; there was a lengthy list of differing suggestions for improving user studies; interdisciplinary communication across the three fields that do user studies is not effective; it was agreed that interdisciplinary contact is difficult; communication across the research/practice divide is not going well; some participants saw academic researchers as the problem, while some participants viewed practitioners as the problem; and most participants agreed that contact across fields and the research/practice divide would be beneficial.

The researchers contend that this analysis is one of many that could be done on the information retrieved from the interviews. Their goal was not to find the definitive answers, but to describe the difficulties that participants are having across disciplines and across the research/practice divide in terms of communication and relating to user studies. The researchers wanted to tease out implications for communication and to illustrate the multiplicity that they found.

Conclusion – It is difficult for this study to draw conclusions except in the most general sense, as it is part of a larger, multi-staged research project. However, this study did find that although participants across fields wanted a synthesis, they also expressed their inability to understand syntheses from fields other than their own. There were some who wanted more theories, while some claimed there were too many theories already. There was much criticism about communication across disciplines, but few

solutions offered. The researchers can offer up no “magic wands” as solutions for these results, but they do suggest that the modes of communication traditionally used in user studies research are not working.

Commentary

This paper is the first report of what will be a 5-stage research project. Taken alone, the paper offers up some interesting qualitative revelations having to do with cross-disciplinary notions of the terms user, audience, and user studies. The researchers interviewed a total of 114 experts across the three fields of LIS, human computer interaction, and communication and media studies. The international experts included participants from all three fields, while the local expert pool was comprised of only librarians. It is not made clear in the paper why the local pool did not include members of the other two disciplines, except perhaps that the researchers were constrained by the parameters of their research funding.

There were some limitations in the process of compiling the experts, which the researchers outline in the paper: of the 83 international experts, only 10 were not living in the US; the researchers faced budget constraints which hampered their efforts to expand the interviews outside of the US; and the sample favoured academics – only 17% of the participants were, at the time of the study, full-time practitioners. The researchers contend that the limitations had little impact on the first stage of the study because of its focus on communication issues.

The qualitative procedures used in this study are clearly described to the extent that they can be in a paper of this length. The

researchers give enough information to inform the reader, as well as for the reader to follow up on the different methods if desired. There is one gap in the description of the qualitative approach taken, where the researchers write that “standard quality control procedures usually used in qualitative research were applied” when discussing the interview transcriptions (11 of 50). There is no elaboration on what these quality control procedures entail.

The thematic analysis revealed disparate notions of the value of user studies across disciplines, mainly due to the fact that different terminology is used – disciplines often do not speak the same language. This revelation is helpful for LIS practitioners. When searching for evidence across disciplines in the area of user studies, it is useful to know that different disciplines can use the terminology differently. That does not mean that cross-disciplinary evidence cannot be used; however an awareness of the differences is necessary in order to fully use the information. There was also the trend of the experts not finding that user studies are doing the job. This can be seen as a call for different approaches to user studies, and these approaches can be informed by the multi-disciplinary aspects revealed by the research in this study.

Work Cited

Dervin, Brenda. “On Studying Information Seeking Methodologically: The Implication of Connecting Metatheory to Method.” Information Processing and Management. 35.6 (Nov. 1999): 727-50.